

ORGANISATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE, MANAGERIAL TOOL OR NEITHER? DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION OF DIFFERENT CLASSICAL THEORIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper will attempt to examine whether Organisational Psychology is a science and the extent to which its findings are of practical use to the managers. As it will be seen, the answer to the second half of this question depends on the answer given to the first one. For this reason, the analysis will present different views concerning what a ‘scientific discipline’ is.

Key word: Organisational Psychology, Management, Science, Classical Theories

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1. INTRODUCTION AND MAIN OBJECTIVES

Organisational psychology has been developed along two distinct directions. The first direction examines the questions “how to fit the man to the job” and “how to fit the job to the man”. The second direction does not see the man and the job as two distinct entities but it tries to examine the complex interplay between work, organisations, groups and individuals. This direction of organisational psychology is labelled the human relations (Arnold, Cooper & Robertson; 1998). The classical management theory, which has form the basis of modern organisational analysis, views organisations as rational instruments or tools, which have as an ultimate goal to achieve efficiency in operations (Thompson & McHugh; 1995). This shows that the findings of organisational psychology are related to the main concerns of the managers. But, to what extent a manager can rely on the conclusions drawn by organisational psychology (OP)? If one claims that the conclusions of OP have scientific validity, then managers would be better off if they integrate these conclusions into their every-day activities.

The analysis will start by presenting different views concerning what a ‘scientific discipline’ is. More specifically, the so-called positivistic account will be presented followed by an analysis of the paradigmatic status of OP. The next section is covering the question of

the practical usefulness of OP to the managers and it includes accounts of the two approaches presented above. This section will end by presenting a drastically different perspective suggested by Ch. Argyris (1994) which attempts to identify what is, can be the meaning of scientific validity in management theories and examines the content of the causal relationships drawn within organisational studies. The paper includes criticisms addressed by the author on the approaches presented as well as conclusive remarks concerning the scientific status of OP and the usefulness of OP to the managers.

2. WHAT IS A 'SCIENTIFIC DISCIPLINE'?

Positivism assumes that the world exists objectively and that various parameters characterising its function can be measured by objective methods. Science is seen as sequence of hypotheses, laws and causal relationships regarding human behaviour. Another major assumption is that researcher can investigate the external world without influencing the 'object', which is investigated (Arnold, Cooper & Robertson; 1998).

In a similar manner Bailey & Eastman (1994) propose that any problem can be analyzed through a combination of controlled observation, careful thinking and public verification. In principle, there are no limits to the reach of scientific inquiry; any problem that can be formulated can be analyzed. Thompson & McHugh (1995) assert that positivists tend towards the employment of methods and adopt a view of the reality, which is borrowed from natural sciences.

Relevant to this Hogan & Sinclair (1994) address their view concerning the extent to which there is indeed a similarity between physical and human science. According to them, research in physical science is much less rational, ideology free and replicable than most of the people believe. Second, physical sciences, similar to the social sciences, develop statistical generalisations that apply to classes of entities (and not individual ones). Finally, the methods of natural sciences are much closer to the methods of social science than most psychologists realise. In physical sciences the problems are solved by developing a theoretical model from which a probability statement is derived concerning the relationship between some variables. Then, by using statistical inference, the validity of the model is tested. To their view this process is formally identical to personality assessments done in psychology. In turn, they conclude that there is a stable core to human nature that gives rise to law-like tendencies in human behaviour around which the behaviour of individuals vary in random ways.

Arnold, Cooper & Robertson (1998) give a nice example concerning how a positivist would conduct a research concerning late arriving for work. As they say, in this case one would assess the frequency of occurrence of this behaviour (lateness) and tries to link this with objective factors like distance from work and possibly other more subjective (but quantifiable) ones, such as job satisfaction. The interpretation given by the positivist is that factors like distance or job satisfaction are the causes for lateness for work (provided there is a positive statistical support). So, it becomes clear that for the positivist any problem which can be properly formulated and from which a number of quantifiable parameters can be identified, causal relationships can be inferred through scientific inquiry. It appears that after the positivist has made the major assumption that the causal relation does exist objectively the only difficult job is to identify and pursue the technicalities of the research.

Bailey & Eastman (1994) took further the viewpoint of the positivists stating that organisational studies have to divide the questions of fact and the questions of value. Facts are the domain of science, while values are the domain of practice. Science is science, precisely to the extent that it does not resolve moral and political issues. This point of view raises questions concerning the usefulness OP can have for the managers since they are the ones who have to face political and moral issues i.e. practice.

A second philosophical premise concerning what makes a discipline being a science is that of the Kuhn. Thomas Kuhn (1970) introduced the notion of the paradigm in his book “The structure of scientific revolutions”. As Pfeffer (1993) points out, Kuhn differentiates among the various disciplines by to extent to which they have developed paradigm i.e. a set of shared theoretical structures and methodological approaches about which there is a high level of consensus. He continues by saying that consensus is necessary although not sufficient condition for the systematic advance of knowledge. He suggests a number of measures for the development of a paradigm within the organisational science. These include PhD graduates employed in colleges or universities for teaching, citation indices etc., although Miner (1984) argues that there is little connection between scientific validity and frequency of mentioning by scholars for theories. So, although it is questionable whether these criteria indeed provide a measure of the development of the paradigm, he comes to the conclusion that in organisational studies in general, there is a fairly low level of paradigm development. In tune to this view Webster and Starbuck (1988) in examining the level of development of the paradigm in OP argued that according to their findings the development of knowledge was progressing rather slowly.

Pfeffer (1993) continues his argument by addressing the question: why some fields are more paradigmatically developed than others are. The answer he provides is that there are inevitable and irreducible differences across disciplines that are inherent in the very nature of the phenomena being studied. It may be that people i.e. the subject of OP are simply more unpredictable and difficult to explain. Nonetheless, as Pfeffer points out, this does not explain the difference in paradigm development between for instance economics and organisational studies.

3. ORGANISATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: USEFUL TOOL FOR THE MANAGERS OR MAYBE NOT?

After presenting the positivistic account for the scientific validity of OP and Pfeffer’s analysis on the level of development of the paradigm in OP we will attempt to provide some views concerning the usefulness of OP to the managers.

Eastman & Bailey (1994), address the problem of usefulness of scientific (in a positivistic scene) organisational theories to the managers. They point that over the last two decades there is a tension between science and practice. In this period organisational research has been facing both external and internal challenges. The external challenges come from practitioners, who doubt in the usefulness of managerial research while the internal challenges are based on methodological, philosophical or political grounds.

It appears that Hogan & Sinclair (1994) developed further this argument. They present a number of reasons for which the managers do not pay the necessary attention to useful theoretical developments. The line of their argument goes like that:

Three ideologies present serious obstacles to the accumulation of knowledge in organisational psychology. These are behaviourism, humanism and destructionism. To their view, humanism was the reaction against the determinism of behaviourism and psychoanalysis. Humanism expresses values within OP and consequently the questions arising from such a demand do not fall in the scientific agenda. Concerning the third barrier towards the development of practically useful OP theories they note that the deconstructionists by considering that each person sees the world differently they conclude there are no absolutes in the universe, and consequently there is no way to claim that one version of reality is more valid than another. This lead to the conclusion that the generalisations of organisational science based on data is no truer than the observation of a poet.

Another point related to the usefulness of organisational science is politics and personalities in organisations. The people who run the organisations mostly ignore psychological research because they think it has nothing to contribute to practice. But why it is like that? The answer they give is based on the theory of Holland (1985), which asserts that there are six types of people in large organisations. These are:

R- Realistic types; I- Investigative types; A- artistic types; S- social types; E-enterprising types and C- conventional types.

According to Hogan and Sinclair (1994) academics are “I” type who do research, pay attention to data and distrust authority figures. Managers are “E” types, who run organisations, pay attention to organisational politics, want to interact and be entertained and consequently they see academics as lacking common sense.

Next to this is politics in organisations. Hogan and Sinclair believe that people rise in organisations more for political than for performance reasons. Senior managers in large organisations adopt innovations not on the basis of the empirical worth but on the basis of the potential consequences of the choice for his or her career in the organisation.

To recapitulate their argument: OP theories that do not follow the positivistic thinking are inferior in quality and consequently they do not have too much to offer to practitioners. Next to this, managers and theorists have different types of personalities, which results in diversified priorities concerning interests. Gary Johns (Johns, 1993) has added his contribution to this point, but he advocates that it is the responsibility of OP theorists that managers often neglect good research carried out in their field. His argument is that work psychologists often neglect political and social aspects of organisations, which appear to be more important in the menageries’ minds. Managers respond more easily to factors like how competitors do things, what legislation dictates and what the upper management or shareholders is more likely to accept.

Pfeffer in the article cited above, poses the question: can organisational science strike an appropriate balance between theoretical tyranny and an anything-goes attitude, which seems to be more characteristic of the present state? The importance of the question is also mentioned in Paul Sparrow’s Editorial in the Journal of Occupational and Organisational Psychology (1999). There he points out that many managerial and social science disciplines have put themselves through a period of critical analysis, although OP seem not to have entered into such a stage. He suggests that OP cannot afford to be complacent about the methods and the knowledge bases it employs. Going back to Pfeffer’s account on the notion of the paradigm, it appears that he contests the paradigmatic adequacy of OP. He then proposes that OP have to synthesise research across three “new bridges”:

- Functional boundaries within the field of psychology and across the fields of organisational behaviour and management
- The work-non-work divide
- The cross-cultural divide

Concerning the first point it appears that Pfeffer would also agree, since as he mentions fields with less developed paradigms (like OP) are more likely to import ideas from fields with highly developed paradigms. Concerning the second bridge, Sparrow suggests that organisational psychologists have to enter new areas of non-work research such as unemployment or learning and self-development. This is because it is expected that in the years to come, activities that employees pursue in the non-work time will influence a wide range of work behaviours. Concerning the third bridge Sparrow points out that there is a growing awareness of the limitations of the British and American assumptions about organisational behaviour. He predicts that cross-cultural relevance of OP will form a major

field of activity in forthcoming years. Presumably OP has to reformulate its paradigm if it wants to become more useful to the practitioners.

The next session provides an evaluation of the positivistic account and the paradigm perspective concerning the usefulness of OP to the managers. It appears that the argument of Hogan and Sinclair concerning the usefulness of OP theories to the managers is circular because it is based on a model (Holland's), which comes from the discipline he is meant to evaluate. Another defect of the positivistic analysis (Bailey & Eastman) is that it assumes that values can be clearly separated from facts, which are the domain of science. This point appears to be weak. Indeed Thompson and McHugh provide a lengthy account on what they call "main stream perspectives". According to these organisations are seen as entities where there is rationality, unanimity of interests and goals and social harmony although this hardly appears to be the case. It appears that the positivistic account is quite self-content but it suffers because it presupposes a large number of assumptions, which are implicitly made. If the manager sees the findings of OP as being scientifically valid (in a positivistic sense), then s/he will be disappointed when these propositions are proved inefficient when they come to explain or predict real life situations.

The analysis concerning the paradigm shows that there is a tendency among some theorists to consider that the level of development of the paradigm of OP is rather low. Argyris (1994) has provided his own account regarding the existence of a paradigm in the theory of management, but the argument could also be applicable to OP: A theory of management should include all the relevant disciplines e.g. accounting, economics, marketing, operations etc. As he says, "the fundamental assumption of after-the-fact theory some day it will come complete enough to be used to inform before-the-fact phenomena". This point enhances Sparrow's saying that the paradigm change is in the air.

Consequently, the level of the development of the paradigm within OP is such that OP can only operate as a tool for the managers in order only to explain the various situations they confront in everyday activities. But managers are more interested in making decisions i.e. they are more interested in having theories, which facilitate predictions. If this is the case then OP has little to contribute to the practitioners.

Argyris (1994) has provided an interesting account concerning organisational theories in general. He says that knowledge produced by empirical research can have external validity. This means that it can be only relevant to the every-day world. He basically discharges the notion of validity from the access weight of induction and causality as it is perceived in science. According to his view theories serve as means to describe and explain but this is not sufficient for managers. What managers need is to create or bring about intended consequences. So, what one can -at most- demand from a good organisational theory is that it is relevant to the external world, but what we need from a better organisational theory is to be "actionable". An 'actionable' theory has -or it must have- the merit to inform the user how to create settings, which will be similar to those under which this theory was first, create. According to Argyris a theory must be formulated in such a way that it will be storable and retrievable from the human mind in every day conditions. Another merit of a theory is that it must contain designs of action i.e. specifications of action which have to be taken in order to achieve intended consequences. This is what he calls "design causality".

4. CONCLUSION

From the preceding analysis it becomes clear that the view of OP as a scientific discipline which comes into conclusions, which have the validity of causal laws, is far from reality. The findings of the bibliographical research conducted indicate that organisational psychologists should be more interested in what other academic disciplines can offer to their endeavour (Arnold, Cooper & Robertson; 1998).

Argyris, and his analysis of the external validity and design causality as desirable characteristics of OP theories provides an interesting account not because it provides final answers to the positivists and paradigms' perspective, but because it indicates a direction of action for OP theorists. For the present stage of the development of OP it appears that his point is more an upper limit of what OP can achieve than what OP really is today. Nonetheless his view emphasises that theories useful to the managers presuppose an extended reference to the conditions under which the conclusion of the research were derived. Presumably the influence of physical sciences and the way it has been developed exert a negative impact on OP and other social disciplines. The view of theories as actionable knowledge i.e. as an intention to bring about consequences shifts the attention from causality, induction and generalisations (greatly employed in physical sciences) into formulating specifications, which will make the desired outcomes more probable to occur.

Nonetheless the findings of OP although not a science (either in terms of the development of a paradigm or in a positivistic sense) are still useful to the managers. An important point has to do with the question of how these findings are interpreted. We assert that OP can be useful to the managers if its findings are interpreted as possible -or at most probable- representations of the world. Take for example Maslow's theory. If a manager interpreters this theory as a rigid hierarchy of needs then this interpretation will not be a successful one. An alternative view will be to consider the needs identified by Maslow, as a map of some of the actual needs an individual may have. A manager should stay clear from any view, which assumes that, this or the other need is definitely more important for one individual.

Additionally, the manager would be better of if s/he considers the possibility that other needs (not included in his interpretation of Maslow's theory) may be of importance to the specific individual. In conclusion, both the OP theorists and the managers would gain in mutual understanding if they drop the rigour assumptions made by positivists regarding generalisations of findings and causal laws. If one adopts this standpoint, then the usefulness of OP, as a discipline providing possible or at most probable patterns becomes apparent.

A second field where OP is useful to the managers is that related to innovative ways of studying organisations. Managers are preoccupied with the effectiveness of organisations and this stops them from analysing methods of doing research. Argyris (1994) for example together with other theorists seem to pay much more attention to more qualitative methods of research while nowadays quantitative research methods are the ones mainly used in organisations. OP theorists have to provide evidence of the successfulness of such methods if they are to be adopted by managers.

In conclusion OP findings do not provide an infallible way of acting to the managers. Nevertheless these findings can be useful if they are interpreted in a non-positivistic way i.e. if they are seen not as 'Laws of Nature' but as possible versions of reality.

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